Not by My Strength Alone: Laboring Together Beyond Our Comfort Zones
Becca & Paul Mohally Renk
To Present in Plenary Annual Session 2013
North Pacific Yearly Meeting

1. **Title**
   BECCA: Good morning Friends. I can’t tell you what a pleasure it is to once again be addressing a Plenary Session of NPYM Annual Session, although the last time I was here I looked a little different…

2. **Becca purple hair**
   My mom took this picture of me at Yearly Meeting in 1995 – she was planning to use it to blackmail me if I ran for public office…so far she hasn’t had the opportunity. The last time I spoke to this Plenary Session was to report on my experiences on…

3. **QYP logo Becca**
   the FWCC Quaker Youth Pilgrimage. Every two years FWCC plans a pilgrimage for Quakers between the ages of 16 and 18, and the summer of 1994 I was 17 years old and very active in Junior Friends.

4. **QYP Pardshaw/Moyallen**
   The Pilgrimage that year was to be in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the Lake District in England. I applied to go but I actually didn’t get in, although I was picked as an alternate. I was so certain that no one would drop out that I had already made other plans for my summer when one afternoon I got a call – another pilgrim wasn’t able to make it. Could I spend 6 weeks on the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage?

5. **QYP Becca/laundry**
   I went. It was the first time I had been farther east than Helena, Montana, and the whole world opened up for me. Incidentally, I also met my future husband, Paul.

6. **Paul QYP**
   PAUL: Good morning, Friends. I’d like to thank you for the gift of speaking here this morning. Public speaking doesn’t come naturally to me, but the process of preparing this talk has been one of inner work and reflection, trying to think about and articulate my spiritual journey which is not easy, but it has been an extraordinary gift for me.

7. **Paul 1st Communion/Family**
   I grew up in Ireland, one of five children in a Catholic Quaker family – we’d pile in the car to go from Mass to Meeting on a Sunday. Having grown up in the strict and closed Irish Catholic Church of the 1950s and ‘60s, I imagine my parents wanted to cover all their bases. I began to be involved with young Quakers when I was about 13 years old.

8. **Paul backpack/teen**
   I jumped at the chance to go to gatherings of Young Friends, I was thrilled when at the age of 13 I was allowed to go off to the capital city by myself with only an address in my pocket and a vague idea of what I’d find. It was an adventure, and I was keen to step out of my local setting. I wanted to go on the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage for those reasons, and because I wanted a better understanding of Quakers and Quaker History.

9. **QYP Pendle Hill**
   On the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage we traveled to the Lake District in England, climbed Pendle Hill and Firbank Fell and worshipped in Preston Patrick meeting house. But we also made time to worship together every day, and each night we took turns organizing Epilogue…

10. **QYP Circle**
    which was usually a form of worship discussion. That daily silence was a grounding that has served me well since, the practice of using the silence to settle myself, ask myself questions and grow from within.

11. **QYP Group**
    On the Pilgrimage, we were 25 young people, we came from both the liberal and the evangelical traditions, we represented 7 countries and spoke 4 different languages…and yet, our sense of community grew so strong that most of us are still in touch with others nearly 20 years later. It was my
first experience of Community, with a capital C, and it moved me so much that unconsciously I’ve continued to look for that Community ever since, and I’ve been doing that for the past 15 years with my fellow pilgrim and wife, Becca.

12. map BECCA: Paul and I have been in Nicaragua for 12 years working in sustainable development with the non-profit

13. logos Jubilee House Community and its project, the Center for Development in Central America. The CDCA’s mission is to work with the poor of Nicaragua, in particular the community of

14. CS Ciudad Sandino which is located near the capital city of Managua. Ciudad Sandino has 175,000 inhabitants and an estimated 80% combined under and unemployment. We work with local communities to help them reach their own goals. Over the past nearly 20 years in Nicaragua, that work has grown into five main areas,


16. Early JHC In addition to being the name of our non-profit, the Jubilee House Community is also an intentional community that was started nearly 35 years ago in North Carolina. Both Quakers, Paul and I are members of the

17. JHC now faith-based intentional community with people of very diverse faith backgrounds, which today is made up of 12 people: here we are with adult children and grandchildren. Our community members are Mike, Kathleen, Sarah, Pat, Kathy, Coury, Daniel, Joseph and our family.

18. Black Now I have a confession to make. The talk we came to give today is not an easy one. As we began working on what we were going to say, the true themes of this talk began to worm their way onto the page where we were writing. I immediately deleted them. Then they would appear again, come up in conversations within our Community, boldly announcing themselves. And yet I resisted. I don’t like to make people uncomfortable – I like to make people feel good, I like to be lighthearted. I didn’t want to talk about difficult issues, I didn’t want to push you beyond your comfort zones. But I got an email from a dear friend who said, “Trust that the Divine will find ways to work through you and Paul and the children.”

19. Smiling students Then I remembered a conversation we had with a university professor who brings a class down to Nicaragua to stay with us for three weeks. Normally, we don’t allow groups unlimited access to the internet, because we want them to unplug from their lives at home so that they can truly plug in to Nicaragua.

20. Vols on pila Normally visiting groups wash their dirty clothes on the pila washstand, just like Nicaraguans, because it gives them an idea of what life is really like, and an appreciation for the work it takes to get anything clean that way!

21. Nica woman on pila But we discovered this professor’s class updating their Facebook posts with their smartphones, and we discovered that they’d sent their laundry out to be washed by Nicaraguan women. When we asked the professor what was going on, he said, “These kids are used to a high level of comfort. If we make them suffer too much they shut down and can’t absorb anything.”

22. BNB Students playing w/kids How insulting to those college students! To assume that they would break down after a few weeks without every comfort imaginable. To assume they’re incapable of understanding suffering. To coddle them to the extent that they will be too afraid to open their hearts, to let in the suffering, to change.
23. **Greg and kids**  So we made up our minds not to coddle you that way. We decided that you are strong enough, open enough, to hear what we were being led to say. That you are worthy of this message. And so it is that we come here today to break your hearts. Why? By making ourselves vulnerable, opening our hearts, and allowing them to be broken, we open ourselves up to the Light that seeps through the cracks of our broken hearts. We open ourselves to the possibility that we are being called to something Greater. We come here asking that you listen with open ears, open eyes, open minds, and especially open hearts. Don’t be afraid to open your heart. Let this message into your heart, let it sink in, and if it’s a bit painful, then we might be on the right path. Today we will share with you the content of our own broken hearts. We will share with you the stories that break our hearts. We’ll talk about our own struggles to keep our hearts open, and we’ll confess to you our failings. We’ll show you the places where we draw strength:

24. **Banana worker**  from those who break our hearts,

25. **Jess Burge & kids**  from those who have a change of heart,

26. **JHC-CDC**  and from the heart of our Community. We will show you our broken hearts, and then we will invite you to make common cause with the Losers in this world.

27. **Farmer quote**  What do I mean by making common cause with the Losers? Dr. Paul Farmer, founder of Partners in Health in Haiti says of working with the poor, “I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I’m not going to stop because we keep losing...people from our [U.S.] background...we’re used to being on a victory team, and actually what we’re trying to do...is to make common cause with the losers...We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the losers, no, it’s not worth it. So you fight the long defeat.”

28. **EP Man in box**  The Losers we try to make common cause with are in Nicaragua, the poor of Nicaragua, but this message is not limited to Nicaragua, because wherever we look, we see the poor, the needy, those who are calling us to let our hearts be broken, to make common cause with them.

29. **Mentally ill**  The needy may be the mentally ill,

30. **Prisoners**  the needy may be prisoners,

31. **Drones**  they may be those being attacked by drones,

32. **Bag lady**  they may be those who are cast out by society,

33. **Gay marriage**  they may be those seeking human or civil rights.

34. **Jesus quote**  So when Jesus said, “As you’ve done to the least of them, so you have done to me” – the least of them may be all of these people.

35. **Mother Teresa**  Mother Teresa prayed, “May God break my heart so completely that the whole world falls in.” I had never heard that prayer when I came to Nicaragua, and it’s certainly not a prayer I would have had the courage to utter out loud, or even in my head. But it is a blessing that I received...God certainly broke my heart.

36. **Becca & promoters**  I first came to Nicaragua as a volunteer with the Jubilee House Community in 1999, nine months after Hurricane Mitch.

37. **NV white plastic**  I spent the summer building provisional plastic houses in the refugee camp of Nueva Vida.

38. **NV mom nursing**  I saw families living in plastic shacks, sleeping on the ground in mud.

39. **NV mom and kids**  I saw parents struggling to feed their families, in constant uncertainty.
40. **Tee n mom nursing 3 yr old**  I saw a three year old who weighed 13 pounds.

41. **NV white houses**  The refugees’ shacks had been put too close together, and so the mayor’s office was taking out every other house and putting those families all the way at the back of the community of 12,000 people.

42. **NV white/black**  Part of what I did that summer was take down their houses – carefully saving each nail to be pounded back in at the other end of the camp, careful not to rip the plastic.

43. **Pick up w/ wood**  We would then pack up the family, their belongings and their entire house into the bed of a pickup truck to take them to the back of the camp where we would rush to put their house up again...because if we failed to do it in one day, the family would have nowhere to sleep that night.

44. **NV wood framing**  Inevitably the wooden posts of the house would have rotted in the ground, and their house would wind up several feet shorter than it had been at the beginning of the day.

45. **Mike truck**  Seeing those families piled into the back of a pickup with all their things, including their “house” broke my heart.

46. **Mike & Zule**  One day I was listening to Mike talk about Nueva Vida to a group of seminary students on the front porch at the CDCA. He told them, “Jesus tells us to love one another as brothers and sisters. And if we truly believed that we were all brothers and sisters, we wouldn’t leave those people there. If that were **your** brother, or **your** sister there sleeping in the mud, would you leave them there?”

47. **Becca & María**  And that’s why I stayed in Nicaragua. Because I realized that I couldn’t go back home to my life of privilege and leave my brothers and sisters in the mud in Nueva Vida.

48. **Paul & Becca w/ Panchita**  **PAUL:** It still breaks my heart to have come from so much privilege. I came to Nicaragua 12 years ago for a “short visit.” Becca had gone to Nicaragua to volunteer with the CDCA for eight months. We were dating at the time and I wanted to go see her as soon as I finished my degree, so I bought a plane ticket to Managua, and then went home and looked Nicaragua up on a map to see where in the world it was. What I saw when I arrived completely changed my heart.

49. **Map Ireland Nicaragua**  The visual richness of the country, the lush vegetation and array of fruits juxtaposed with stark poverty of people living in tiny tents, hauling huge loads on heavy wooden carts, washing windshields at stoplights. Afterwards, when I went back to Ireland, I no longer felt at home. Suddenly I was uncomfortable and was astounded by the wealth I saw. Who was I to have so much, just because I’d been born in Ireland? The Nicaraguans I met just happened to have been dealt a worse hand. They helped me to begin to understand about privilege and power.

50. **Rich land**

51. **Hauling loads**

52. **meeting with power**  Power itself isn’t an evil – there’s the power of the spirit, for example. A lot of our work involves empowerment, which is positive. And often we find ourselves using our power on behalf of the poor, especially using the connections we have to help Nicaraguan communities reach their own goals. But money and privilege translate into power over others, over the powerless. And that is the power we must struggle to give up.

53. **Black**  All of us who are from countries of privilege have power. All of us who were born into or have made economically stable families have power. All of us who got an education have power. And yes, even today, all of us with white skin have power. Understanding this is very uncomfortable for me. How many of you here identify with those who don’t have power? How many of you here root for the
underdog? I know I do. I think of myself as one of the people. So for me to acknowledge that I have power – and even unintentionally have power over others – is hard for me.

54. Paul & Beto Sometimes visitors to Nicaragua ask us, “After so long here, do you feel Nicaraguan?” And it would be lovely to say, yes, we’ve been here so long that all the differences between my neighbors and me have just disappeared. But that wouldn’t be honest. Because as long as I have the option – whether I ever take it or not – but as long as I have the option to get on a plane and fly out of Nicaragua, then I will always have more power than those around me.

55. Plane I can leave Nicaragua anytime, and go home and make a good living in my rich country, and my neighbors in Nicaragua don’t have that choice. It’s important for me to understand that, because if I pretend that my privileges don’t give me power over others, then I am incapable of giving up that power.

56. Metro musician With all my privilege, I have the power to not open my heart. You all have the power to not open your hearts, to not let your hearts be broken. We have the privilege to ignore what we see. That is a power we have, and one we must give up. We must surrender our hearts.

57. Swimming pool fence BECCA: After so long in Nicaragua, sometimes I find myself taking the injustices here for granted. Sometimes I find myself looking at homes made out of the sides of kiddie pools as if that is normal. Getting used to poverty is dangerous, because I might get so used to it that I can’t see it. We have a friend who is originally from India who came to see our projects in Nicaragua. He later told us that growing up in India amid such extreme poverty, he was unable to see it there.

58. Flies He used to watch the little boys in the street play a game where they would hit putrid puddles with a stick to make the flies swarm up, and when they would land again, they would hit the puddle again. That was the whole game.

59. Poor of India And yet Madhu couldn’t see that poverty. He later told us “The poor were like so much white noise to me. It took me going to Nicaragua and seeing the poor there, to really be able to see the poor of India.”

60. Banana worker kid When I find myself turning away, when I find myself not seeing the poverty around me in Nicaragua, I force myself to turn back. I have learned that when something is too painful for me to see, then I need to look. I need to see it with tender new eyes, I need to surrender, and let my heart be broken.

61. Running to dump truck That is one of the reasons that we insist that our groups go to visit the dump behind our clinic in Nueva Vida. The dump is called La Chureca and 150 people work there – people who live off the trash of others:

62. Plastic they not only sell the recyclables they find in the landfill (metals, glass, plastic), but they also
63. Trash fence make their houses from what they find, they wear what they find,
64. Girl drinking water and they even eat what they find.
65. Hanging off truck La Chureca is a place on the edge – of the city, and of society: the people who live there are in constant danger from the smoke and dust; from the racing garbage trucks; from each other – theft, drug use, and violence are rampant.
66. Girls smiling And yet, the people there are just like us: with their own loves and strengths and hopes…if we are truly each other’s sisters and brothers, how can we leave those people in La Chureca?
67. Girls laughing How can we turn our backs on them? How can we not open up our hearts to them?
We as human beings try to avoid pain – seeing another person in a
desperate situation is a painful emotional experience for us. If we don’t have to look into the face of a
desperately poor person and recognize them as fellow human beings, then we don’t have to feel that pain
of connection with them.

But if they can live there, and dig through the trash each day, and eat trash
fried in a trash can over a trash fire, then the very least I can do is go there and see it with my own eyes.

I always ask the churequeros what they think of a group of gringos walking
out to the dump to see them. Do they feel like animals in a zoo? Inevitably, the workers there say that
nobody sees them, they are completely ignored by society, and so when a group of gringos bothers to
come out to see them, they are pleased that we care.

By going to the dump, seeing and feeling and hearing and smelling where the
people of La Chureca spend their days, by talking with them, by shaking their hands, we acknowledge
them, and in acknowledging their existence, they regain dignity.

Then the poor have faces. One morning’s visit is not solidarity, it
doesn’t even come close. But when those who have – land, money, education, resources: the gringos –
cross over to those who have not – the people of La Chureca, then for a moment we are joining our
sisters and brothers in shared humanity.

For a moment, we look into their faces and recognize ourselves, see that they
are no different than we are, a gift of clarity we cannot dream of repaying. That one morning is not
enough. But for a moment, as Paolo Freire says, we “suffer with them and fight at their side.”

In one of his homilies, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador called this
transcendence. He said, “The transcendence that the Church preaches is not alienation, it is not going to
Heaven to think about eternal life and forget about earthly problems. It is transcendence in the heart of
man.

It is getting involved with the child, with the poor, with the ragged, with the sick, in
his hut, in his shack, it is sharing with him. And from within the guts of that misery, of his situation,
transcending it, lifting him up,

encouraging him, saying to him: ‘You are not trash, you are not marginalized.’
It is to say exactly the opposite of that: ‘You are of great value.’”

PAUL: Now that we’ve talked about the poor and our calling to work with the poor
and now that we’ve touched on power and our inherent power over the poor with whom we feel called
to work, we want to talk about giving up that power: the concept of voluntary powerlessness. We
recognize that we will never be able to completely shed our power. But we do believe that in order to
make any real change in the world, those of us who were born into positions of power and privilege
must strive to give up that power over others.

I’d like to give a few examples to illustrate what I mean by voluntary powerlessness.
A few years ago we had a nurse come to volunteer with us and after a month, she was still having
trouble communicating with our clinic staff, in particular, Henry, who was trained as a medic in the war
and has worked in the clinic since it was founded in 1999. We determined that language wasn’t the
problem, that it was a communication issue, and so the volunteer suggested to Kathleen that staff be sent
for training to learn to better communicate with her, the volunteer. Not only did it not occur to the well-
meaning volunteer that she was trying to bring the mountain to Mohammed, but she didn’t grasp the
concept that her role was that of
79. *El Porvenir* planting the soil, not the sower. Jesus told the parable of the Sower, because in Palestine they planted the same way the *campeños* in Nicaragua plant sesame today: *al voleo*. They take seed and scatter it, just like that. Some of that seed doesn’t sprout because it falls on rocks, or on poor soil, but some will fall on rich soil and will grow.

80. *Sesame stalk* good sesame. So for this volunteer, her job was to be the fertile land and the Nicaraguan people were to sow the seeds. She was in Nicaragua to learn, not to teach. For all of us who work with people with less privilege, our job is to have fertile hearts, ready to germinate new seeds that are planted there, ready to learn and change and grow.

81. *Henry* If that volunteer had listened, really listened, she might have understood that Henry had done all the nursing at the clinic for more than a decade, and when she came in and changed the way things had always been done without taking his opinions into account, he felt trampled on. She had not yet realized that all her training did not make her an expert on Nicaragua, nor that an underfunded Nicaraguan clinic serving the very poor cannot be run the same way as a U.S. for-profit health clinic – that Henry had reasons for doing things his way, that he had much to teach her. It was only once she understood her power over others and began to let it go that she was able to learn. But she had good intentions. And that’s part of the problem.

82. *Ivan Illich* BECCA: In 1968, Monsignor Ivan Illich addressed a group of U.S. volunteers in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and tried to convince them not to impose their good intentions on Mexico. “To hell with good intentions,” he told them. “That is theological statement. You will not help anybody by your good intentions.”

83. *Students and flag* He went on to encourage the students to challenge “the idea that every American has something to give and at all times may, can, and should give it.” Growing up in the U.S., we are taught that for every problem there is a solution, and that our ideas are always best. Unconsciously, we believe that if other countries don’t look like ours, that’s because they haven’t “gotten there” yet. The idea that other ways of living are just as valid as ours does not even occur to us.

84. *U.S. doctors* All of us – and I am definitely including myself here – all of us tend to set out to make the world in our American image. I have to forcibly turn off the voice in my head that is constantly “fixing” what I see. We had a medical student come to volunteer in our clinic and after her first week in country she started insisting that the only way forward for the clinic was to get computers and an internet connection for the doctors. I couldn’t understand what advantage that would give the doctors or the clinic, given our frequent power outages, our paper chart system and lack of computer literacy in our staff.

85. *Clinic doctors* Finally Kathleen explained it to me, “She’s used to seeing doctors in white coats sitting at desks with computers, and our doctors don’t fit her image. She wants our doctors to sit at computers to make her more comfortable.” We are hard-wired this way to such an extent that it is simply *inconceivable* to most Americans that our ideas aren’t the better way of doing things and so it is veritably *impossible* for us to keep our great ideas to ourselves.

86. *Becca* I have struggled with this, and indeed *continue* to struggle with this all the time. It was not until I was a junior in college that I began to understand that these were even issues that needed to be dealt with. I was well educated, open-minded, and extremely well-traveled for a U.S. citizen. I had traveled alone around Europe visiting local families, I had spent a summer volunteering in Mexico with AFSC, I had spent an entire semester studying and volunteering with reconciliation organizations in Northern Ireland. I was critical of U.S. foreign policy and practices, and considered myself well-informed. In short, I was a good liberal Quaker! Yet still, I was completely unaware that the way I wanted to do things as a U.S. citizen – and the ideas that I instinctively wanted to spread around the world – were actually *part of the problem*. 
87. Anti-U.S. That didn’t change for me until one day when I was fervently arguing with my Spanish housemate that the image of the U.S. in other countries – and feelings about the U.S. – are overall very positive. After a lengthy discussion, she finally turned to me and in no uncertain terms said, “No, they’re not. We don’t even like you.”

88. View of world It took someone shocking me, angering me, and in the end offending me to get me to begin to see my own irrelevance. The idea that I might be insignificant to the rest of the world had never even occurred to me. What an incredible sense of entitlement we are given as U.S. citizens! I cannot thank my housemate enough for turning my world around 180 degrees so that I might finally get a glimpse of what others see of my country, from outside it.

89. Black This message is relevant not only for those of us who find ourselves called to work outside of the U.S., but wherever we are called to work with those with fewer privileges than ourselves. Most of us in this room are white, most are middle class, the vast majority of us have finished high school, most have a higher education degree, and a large percentage have post graduate degrees. Nearly anywhere we are called to work will be with those who come from fewer privileges than ourselves – working with the urban homeless, with need-based scholarship students, with farm workers, teaching children English as a second language, with prisoners, in public health, with drug addicts, working to prevent hate crimes, working to stop gun violence – in all of these situations, we will find ourselves working with, on behalf of, accompanying, and lobbying people over whom we exert a certain power by the very reason that we were born with lighter skin or into a better economic situation, or we have more education than they do. And we must tread lightly, and bear in mind Illich’s challenge.

90. Illich quote He told that group of volunteers, “I am here to suggest you voluntarily renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you…I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the ‘good’ which you intended to do….The only thing you can legitimately volunteer for…might be voluntary powerlessness, voluntary presence as receivers…without any hope of returning the gift…” Voluntary presence as the soil, not the sower.

91. Singing on porch PAUL: Renouncing anything is scary, giving up power is scary, and we are a fearful people. We can’t do it by our strength alone. To have any success, we need to be surrounded by people who support us, who will challenge each other to be better people, who aren’t afraid to be brutally honest with each other.

92. Work in communities We’re convinced that working together is the only way to get things done, because we believe that life is sustainable within communities. The CDCA works with communities of Nicaraguans rather than individuals, because we believe that is more sustainable. And the Jubilee House Community lives together as an intentional community because we believe that is more sustainable.

93. Paul SM Although Becca has worked with the CDCA since we came to Nicaragua, we didn’t join the intentional community of Jubilee House until we’d been in Nicaragua for 6 years. I was working an 8-5 job in Managua at an architect’s office, designing furniture for foreigners and the rich Nicaraguan elite, speaking English all day. And one morning in traffic on my way to work I just thought, what am I doing? Is this what I came to Nicaragua to do? I didn’t want to use my energy to work for the rich helping them to build more riches. I realized I was not making myself available for the work I really felt called to, working with the poor in Nicaragua.

94. Paul taller So I quit the day job and built us a house out in the hills behind Ciudad Sandino and I put up a little workshop out there where I could put a few local guys to work and we started making wooden kitchen utensils and now we do larger furniture.

95. Eibhlín birth Our oldest daughter Eibhlín was born at Jubilee House. Kathleen was the doula and the whole community was there for her birth. The folks at Jubilee House were already like family, and
with Eibhlín’s birth we felt so much closer to them. When we went back to our house with our new baby Kathy said to us, “It just feels wrong for you to be leaving, I feel like you’re part of our Community.”

96. Black BECCA: And yet, still we didn’t join the intentional community. We are not brave people. We have trouble hearing our call. The Still, Small Voice had to get very big and scream in our ears before we joined community. Why did it take us so long? I was afraid. Afraid of sharing a common purse with others – how would that work? It’s very scary to throw your money into a pot with others. I was afraid of what people would say, afraid of taking a step outside the societal norm. I was also afraid to sign myself up for the Losing Team, afraid of fighting that long defeat that Paul Farmer talks about, afraid to make common cause with the Losers. Certainly, part of me always wanted to be successful, wanted to do something extraordinary and take credit for it. And if I signed up for the Losing Team of Jubilee House Community, not only would I be guaranteed a string of losses, but I wouldn’t even be able to take credit for that, I’d have to share it with eleven other losers.

97. Nun picture But here’s the thing…I’d always wanted to be a nun, unfortunately small issues like the fact that I’m not Catholic and am married have kept me from following that dream. But I’ll tell you what appealed to me about religious orders – the fact that the Church and the Order are in charge of looking after incidentals like food and shelter means that the religious get to concentrate all their energies on the work. And that’s what I always wanted to do. Just focus on the work. And that’s actually why the Jubilee House Community was founded.

98. MKS old In the late 1970s, Mike, Kathleen and Sarah were youth workers in the Presbyterian Church and they and their friends spent a lot of time talking about the Church and the ways it was falling short, especially in the area of Community, and as Mike puts it “We thought we could do a better job than the Church was doing.” All of their group were all holding down jobs and maintaining separate households and barely making it and they thought if they all lived together, only a few of them would have to hold down jobs to maintain their shared household and the rest could focus on working with the poor. On moving day, Mike, Kathleen and Sarah were the only ones to show up, and that’s how Jubilee House Community got started.

99. 2007JHC community PAUL: Joining community freed us up to make decisions based on what was right, as opposed to what we needed to do to survive. Becca and I realized that we could spend our lives making decisions based on furthering our careers or we could make one decision to follow our vocation. So we joined community. Although now it’s hard to imagine a time that we weren’t part of Community, it’s a process, and we’re still figuring out how to be Community. I imagine it’s something we’ll be trying to get right forever. We didn’t move into the same house as everyone else for two reasons: their house was already full, and we already had a house of our own. But we live close by. So we try to find other ways to be community.

100. JHC Thanksgiving Eric We eat dinner at Jubilee House twice a week, every Monday night at five o’clock we gather to worship together, we celebrate together. Community means making a solid commitment to other people, not just at the Jubilee House, but we also see it with the communities where we work.

101. El Porvenir One of the things I do is take visiting groups and volunteers up to a rural coffee cooperative where we work. The co-op is called El Porvenir, which means The Future, and is made up of 280 people living at the top of a hill beyond the end of a road in the middle of nowhere.

102. Coffee shade trees At El Porvenir they look after their land, growing their coffee under beautiful shade trees with cacao and avocado.

103. Men playing cards The co-op members are ex-guardia of the dictator Somoza, ex-Sandinista soldiers, and ex-Contra, all bitter enemies within the history of Nicaragua. But now their fate
is tied together. They were all workers on the coffee hacienda when the owner fled the country and so they became the new owners under agrarian reform.

104. René As the co-op’s vice-president, René says, “It’s the poverty that unites us.” What none of them could do on their own, they can all do together. Although they may not agree on religion or politics, each one looks after the good of the whole.

105. Old man in box There’s an old man, don Lázaro, who showed up at the co-op one day. He sleeps in one of the wooden boxes were the workers used to sleep in the old days, and

106. Carrying bamboo He makes all the bamboo baskets they use to harvest the coffee. Though he has no direct family, no one to look after him, each household up there – none of whom have anything to spare – takes its turn feeding him. He will never go hungry and he will always have a roof over his head.

107. Diablo There’s a big burly man in the co-op, Pedro, whom everyone calls el Diablo, the devil. He’s always leading the work, planting his blue t-shirt on. He has hands that feel like shoe leather and are the size of shovels, he is a workhorse. Last November I arrived up at the co-op with a

108. Dentist visiting dentist to see patients, and Diablo waited around in the background until the end of the day, seeing an opportunity, timidly asked if he could be seen to, then he came forward and got in the chair. The doctor saw he had a terrible rotten tooth that was causing him pain and needed to come out, so he shot Novocain into the gums.

109. EP View But it was time to go, if we didn’t leave then, the whole group would get caught in a rainstorm down in the valley where the roads become rivers. It broke my heart to lean over to Diablo and tell him, sorry hermano, there’s no time to pull your tooth today. “Sure, sure,” he said apologetically, hopped up out of the straining, creaking chair, and said, “maybe next time.”

110. Dentist kids The next time I went back up with a dentist was in March – but there were so many patients to be seen, and Diablo let the others be attended to. In June, another dentist visit, and again Diablo refused to go to the front of the line. I asked him why and he said, “Let the children go first, they can’t handle the pain as well as I can.” Next time a dentist goes up there, you can bet Diablo will still be at the back of the line, letting everyone else go first.

111. El Porvenir group Every time I visit El Porvenir, I find myself humbled. They have so much to teach me about what is truly important. They didn’t come together out of choice, they’re not trying to live out some kind of utopia, they’re just trying to survive...together. For me, El Porvenir has become a touchstone of Community.

112. Black BECCA: Being together in Community gives us strength to do the work we do. When one of us is sick, or our hearts are too raw, or we just can’t handle another flat tire or another defeat in a long line of defeats, then another one of us will step forward in our place. When a big decision has to get made, there are many of us to make that decision together. Earlier this year we had a tough decision to make, and we sat down together to talk about our Nicaraguan staff.

113. 2012 Staff pic They hadn’t received a pay raise for two years, and the price of living in Nicaragua keeps going up and up. Kathy showed us the numbers, what we had, and what it would take to give everyone the raises they needed, and we simply didn’t have enough. We talked together and thought and prayed and in the end, made that decision the way we always make decisions. We say, “What’s the right thing to do here?” Our staff works extremely hard, and all of them support their extended families. None of us could say that not giving that raise, that waiting until we might have extra cash, was the right thing to do. So we made the decision to give all our staff raises on faith that money would come in to cover it.

114. JHC Meeting in office Most businesses, organizations, and, I’m sorry to say, even churches don’t
make decisions like that. Our friends worry that we should be more logical, more conservative, more cold-hearted in our decisions. We haven’t raised all the money to cover the pay increases yet, but over the years we’ve made a lot of decisions based on faith, and so far, it’s always worked out okay. On our own, none of us could be so courageous. Kathy says that by ourselves, we are too easily misled by our own perspectives, anticipations, and prejudices. But in Community we get confirmation – or redirection – from the group. It is the strength of our community as a whole and our collective faith that makes those brave, crazy decisions possible.

115. Black

PAUL: It’s important to recognize that we are not in charge, otherwise we’d quickly drive ourselves insane. In our community, Sarah is fond of telling people about what she calls her Volcano Theology.

116. Volcano & cement

She takes groups of volunteers, who’ve been carrying cement and gravel all week, up to the crater of the active Masaya volcano, and she has them peer into the huge empty smoking crater. Then she tells them, “Think about how heavy your cement bags were this week and how many of them it would take to fill up that hole.”

117. Lava flow

then she shows them the miles and miles of lava flow that are visible from the edge of the crater, stretching all the way to distant Lake Managua. And she continues, “Think about the power it takes to throw that amount of weight from the bottom of that volcanic crater all the way to that horizon. On a good day, I look at that lava flow and remember that I am not in charge, and that is very good news, for myself and for the planet. My job is not to complete any task. My job is just to be faithful each day in doing what I can. Not being in control is a very good thing.”

118. Sarah leaping into volcano

Sarah’s Volcano Theology is what 12 Step Programs would call letting go and letting God. Acknowledging our powerlessness.

119. Poverty

For most of us foreigners, it’s very hard for us to follow that Nicaraguan Volcano Theology. When we are faced with a raw, oozing poverty of the kind we’ve never seen before, it’s terribly hard for us to acknowledge that we are powerless to “fix” it.

120. Dentist

In Nicaragua there is 1 dentist for every 10,000 people. A visiting North American dentist peers into the gaping maw of that poverty and sees rotten, abscessed teeth in need of pulling. For that dentist, the most urgent thing is to pull teeth, and every waking moment in Nicaragua not spent pulling teeth is a waste of time.

121. Dentist

We’ve had dentists – and doctors, and nurses and engineers – tell us they don’t want to spend two hours listening to a talk about Nicaraguan history and current events when they could be seeing patients instead.

122. Dentist

And it’s been our job to pull that dentist aside, take a deep breath, and say, “No matter how hard you work, there will still be teeth left that need pulling when you go to get on your plane and leave Nicaragua. If you don’t understand the context of the rotten teeth, if you don’t understand why there is so much poverty here that leads to so many rotten teeth, then you can’t do any good for Nicaraguans when you go back home. So now is a time for you to listen, and learn. Then you can go pull teeth until it’s time to stop.” It’s wonderful when that dentist “gets it.” We can only do so much. We can’t fix everything. Our job is to do what we can with the time we’re given. The rest we have to surrender to a Greater Power.

123. Howard Brinton quote

And on the days when we can manage to do that, it is a relief. When we can let go of outcomes, we remember that our calling is to be in Nicaragua and to show up for work, and the rest is up to the Divine. As Howard Brinton said, “God does not require more than is possible. He only demands that we live up to our capacity. As for consequence, how can a finite mind tell what they in the long course of time may be?” Our capacity, however, is always much larger than we think it is, and the
Divine will most certainly require more of us than we want to do. It is a certainty that we will be stretched far, far outside of our comfort zones, allowing us to live up to our true capacity, discovering strengths we never suspected we had.

124. Paul juggling In Nicaragua I see things that still break my heart. I’m a juggler, and one day I found a guy who could juggle five clubs, which is a rare thing. He asked me to practice with him, so I went to his house. He was there with his little girl in a plastic hovel with dirt floors. I brought my girls and they played with the other little girl while he and I juggled together. And there we were: I could juggle five clubs. He could juggle five clubs. I had little girls. He had a little girl. But I have a lovely big house and an easy life, and he lives under plastic and has to scrape together a living juggling at stoplights.

125. Paul with people What has changed me is personal relationship, and I think it is those connections that make others change as well. For us, we wouldn’t be the people we are without our Community and all that encompasses that wider community for us – the Nicaraguans we live next to, those we work beside, the community of visitors to Nicaragua, the wider Quaker community around the world, and of course our intentional community that gives us the strength, the wisdom, the courage that we don’t have on our own.

126. Happy vol It gives me hope to see that people can change. I see volunteers and visitors come from wealthy countries to visit Nicaragua for the first time. We all have this spark inside us, but most of the time, it’s dark. Over the years, I’ve seen so many people’s little light turn on when they come down and actually see their Nicaraguan brothers and sisters face to face.

127. Dirty window One volunteer told us that coming to Nicaragua “everything becomes much clearer…like seeing through a dirty window that has suddenly been cleaned.”

128. Vol I remember one volunteer, recently graduated from college, who came down looking insecure. He went up to the El Porvenir coffee co-op for an extended stay, and on the way out the door he looked like he’d rather be doing anything else in the world than heading to the top of a godforsaken mountain in the middle of nowhere. When he came back down the mountain weeks later, he was a changed person.

129. Rice & beans The diet of beans and rice and iguana had slimmed him down, work fertilizing coffee plants had tanned him. But more than that, he stood taller, he was beaming and the spark inside him was brightly lit and shining out through his eyes. My dad, the psychotherapist, is fond of saying “the only person you can change is yourself.”

130. Spartan life EP Up at El Porvenir our volunteers see their world reduced to the basics – food, water, shelter, work alongside an incredible community. That Spartan life simplifies things and makes it possible for them to do some powerful inner work. I feel it in myself each time I go up there – if I open myself up to what the folks at El Porvenir can teach me, then I, too, return a very different person from the one went up there. My own inner spark lights up.

131. Sparks My hope lies in those sparks, lighting one at a time and then travelling back to their homes and maybe one day enough of those sparks will gather together that we’ll start a bonfire of justice.

132. Black BECCA: Sometimes outsiders come and look at all we’re doing and say ‘aren’t you wonderful!’ and sometimes I take that to heart. Encouragement is good. But sometimes they say ‘aren’t you wonderful for making such a sacrifice?’ and that is very dangerous. It’s true that being so far from our families – from my incredible mom over there – is indeed very hard. But living in Nicaragua is not a sacrifice for us, it is a joy. Raising our daughters in Nicaragua is not harder – in fact, it’s easier to raise them in a close knit Nicaraguan village far from the seductive consumerism of the United States. Working with the poor is not a sacrifice for us, it is a profound privilege, a blessing.
“What does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.”

If I begin to believe that the work I have been called to is a big sacrifice, then I am no longer walking humbly with my God. Instead, I am so busy letting out martyred sighs and thinking I’m wonderful that I’m no longer listening to the community, let alone the Still, Small Voice.

I’m usually murky on what exactly it is that Still, Small Voice is calling me to – most of us aren’t lucky enough to get hit upside the head with visions and voices. But one thing is very clear to me.

We are called to have our hearts be broken. Over and over and over again. After so much time in Nicaragua, what still breaks my heart?

The pregnant teenager riding on dump trucks in La Chureca wearing nothing on her feet but socks. She breaks my heart.

The children in the market with their faces stuffed into baby food jars of glue, sniffing through their noses to get high, through their mouths to ease their hunger. They break my heart.

My friend Martha who waited 8 months for pap smear results, who was so wasted when she died of cervical cancer that she resembled nothing so much as a famine victim, whose ruined singing voice whispered to me through parched lips, “I don’t want to die.” Martha’s suffering broke my heart. But these same things that break my heart, that could break me completely, are what gives me strength to continue on fighting the Long Defeat.

Kathleen tells the story of a woman in Nueva Vida who has a daughter with cerebral palsy, and although the daughter can’t walk, the mother gets her to the clinic by carrying her draped over her shoulder. Kathleen says, “If they can do that, then we’ve got no excuse for not doing our job.”

So where do we go from here? In this area, I’ll try to take a leaf out of the book of the counselor in our community, Pat. Unlike the rest of us who tend to dwell exclusively on practical actions and shy away from process, Pat is not impatient with process, and she says that sometimes all we can do with this heart-breaking stuff is to sit with it. Discerning what to do will come in time.

But let me ask this: how do we feel when a crisis comes along, when some righteous unequivocal action is called for? We step into that as if our whole lives were meant for that moment, and indeed we were made for these moments. We’re Quakers. In all our history, we’ve never been content to wait until a movement gained momentum, until it was mainstream, until it was comfortable before joining it. We’re outliers.

Who was at the forefront of the abolition movement? Was it easy for those Quakers on the Underground Railroad? Absolutely not.

Who fed the hungry during the famine in Ireland? Was it easy for those Quakers who stepped forward to do the work that others refused? It most certainly was not.

Who in this room remembers when this Yearly Meeting began to talk about marriage equality? Many of you know how hard that was, how painful that was, how there was not any kind of clarity within Yearly Meeting. Yet you were willing to hear hard things being said, you were willing to remain present for the conversation. And now more than 20 years later, our Yearly Meeting with our marriage minute produced after so much struggle, was one of the first drops in what finally swelled into the ocean that washed away the Defense of Marriage Act.

Before coming here we talked with our Community and with many Friends about the message we were feeling called to share today. And what we heard was that North Americans, and the Quaker community specifically, are “thirsty,” “hungry,” and “starving” for this message – those
are the words we heard used over and over. Thirsty, hungry, starving.

146. Marge Abbott quote As Marge Abbott writes, in the Religious Society of Friends “as a body, we have lost the clarity of vision which once unified us and made us a threat to the established order.”

147. Eric cartwheel Friends, it’s possible that we’re all like that volunteer, aware that we need our world to be turned upside down, we all looking for our own El Porvenir. We are hungering and thirsting to have the world distilled down to food, water, shelter, so that we can be free love one another as brothers and sisters, with all that implies. Friends, we find ourselves here together today because the time is ripe. We’re ready.

148. Girl’s face We don’t believe that the Spirit calls us to make minor changes. The Light doesn’t draw us to a life of ease and comfort.

149. Goodwill clothes Jesus didn’t say “Go unto your closet and pick out a handful of things you don’t wear and give them to the poor.” Jesus said, “Sell everything that you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me.”

150. Greg jumping boys The Divine doesn’t call us to mediocrity. The Divine calls us to make common cause with the poor, and to absolutely pour ourselves out in the struggle, into the Long Defeat.

151. Girls laughing We are meant to make radical changes. We are meant to make outrageous changes. The poor are no different than us, the poor are us. We are called to a radical love of one another, as brothers and sisters.

152. Man walking road We’re not meant to do it alone, but together, as brothers and sisters, as community. We have a community – a collection of communities – right here, with a history steeped in experience of discernment, of seeking clearness, and of moving forward in action.

153. Rosalie Wahl quote Rosalie Wahl said, “Not by my strength alone. I cannot even dwell in the wide and difficult place to which I have been let without the light and strength which comes to me through the beloved community. And I have discovered, what I already knew, that Friends are only a part – albeit a dear part – of the beloved community.”

154. Eric’s dry earth plant Let’s clasp hands for strength, take a deep breath, and open our hearts. Our Beloved Community will be here to hold us when they break. And through the cracks in our broken hearts, Friends, we must trust that Way will Open.